

VareseNews

“Hello darling, I’m sitting down!” How we speak on the telephone

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Dear Editor,

I will begin with two episodes that I think are generally valid, returning to an experience that anyone observing modern society can have. The first takes place on a train, where increasingly often, I hear conversations like this taking place on mobile phones: “Hello? Hi ... We’re now in Busto Arsizio ... In five minutes, I’ll be in Gallarate.”

The second episode takes place in a cinema hall, shortly before the beginning of the film. A distinguished gentleman, with a mobile phone attached to his ear, is looking for a place to sit, and this is what he whispers to the person on the other end before he settles into the chair: “I’m now sitting down.” What these two episodes have in common is the absolutely unessential nature of the contents of the message. No less evident is the new dignity acquired by the most banal aspects of everyday life. **People have extremely long conversations on mobile phones**, talking about what they have eaten, what the temperature is like, how they are dressed, and to give and ask for information of the same importance about children and relatives. It makes you wonder how they managed, before the advent of mobile phones, not being able to ask so many questions or make such essential and urgent observations about life? I will say nothing of the literally obscene behaviour of these callers, who, in a stentorian voice, express negative opinions about other people, or, with the same volume, conduct noisy negotiations with the person on the other end, maybe using an occasional curse, insult and obscenity that have very little to do with polite conversation.

Now, why should these examples of current social interaction, which I have just described, interest the readers of this column? **I think the readers might find it somewhat interesting because this collection of anecdotes demonstrates effectively some of the new aspects that the mobile phone has introduced into our communication habits.** Indeed, we must conclude that, in the last twenty years, something truly shocking has happened to our customs. In some cases, it is a question of exacerbating old bad habits, like not being able to have a civil conversation. Giacomo Leopardi had noticed this, but if, in his day, conversation was in a poor state of health, today, it would appear to be moribund. We need only observe our fellow guests at a restaurant. If there are, let’s say, eight, and there are men and women, after a few minutes of conversation, they divide into two groups of four people, often with the men on one side, and the women on the other, and immediately afterwards, they subdivide into four groups of two people. At the table, even before the food arrives, the mobile phone takes its pride of place. **A few minutes pass, and everyone is conversing on his or her mobile phone, or bent double, checking messages or emails.**

What is new in the use of the mobile phone is the change in the relationship between the cost of the phone and the value of the purpose and the change in the confidentiality of a conversation. On the first aspect, I must say, as we have seen in the episodes mentioned at the beginning, that, very often, with the exception of managers, politicians, labour leaders and soldiers, for whom the use of a rapid instrument of communication is undoubtedly essential, there is no proportional relationship between the use of the mobile phone and the practical value of the communication. But the most profound change is in **confidentiality**, which has always been the mark of the telephone conversation. Just consider how telephone systems are made in order to ensure a minimum of respect for the conversation, as happens, for example, in the telephone cabins, the purpose of which is to make hearing easy, while not being

heard. However, when I observe this distressing social situation, it is difficult for me not to see **those who use the mobile phone everywhere** (at the bar, in the street, on public transport, in shops ...) **as participants in a daily reality show that is increasingly invasive and pervasive**, that consists of imbecility, of little provocations and of continuous violation of confidentiality. After more than sixty years, with the abolition of the boundary between reality and fiction, this is how we explain that “phenomenology of the American spirit” of which Theodor Adorno had identified, with striking precision, the symptoms and disturbing features in his “Minima Moralia”.

The philosophers have insisted a lot on what is a characteristic of the human being, and chiefly of the citizen, the ability to express, by means of the language, not only the sensations of pain or pleasure, but also moral, political, aesthetic and philosophical reasoning. **An uneducated nation is easy to dominate.** Taking part in public deliberations is an activity that requires the ability to understand the meaning of complex concepts and to grasp well the distinctions, for example, between freedom and servitude, between democracy and populism, between government of law and dominion of men, and so on. **But maybe it is better not to wonder how individuals that have impoverished their language so much, and have almost entirely lost the ability and the desire to discuss, to argue and to construct lines of reasoning, can fulfil their duties as citizens.**

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